

Eudora Welty's Country—and My Own

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SPEAKING PRIMARILY as a writer, I often say that there have been two women in my life (always of course excepting Jane Austen, who lived in another time and another place); and they are Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor. Because it was Miss Welty who first awakened me to the possibilities, for fictional purposes, of the time and place I had been living in all my life; and it was Miss O'Connor who later on intensified whatever convictions I had managed to acquire about what my fictional country was and what I owed to it and to myself.

But first perhaps I should rehearse briefly here something of my own history. I was born in 1930 in Ripley, Tennessee, which is in the western portion of the state, about fifty miles north of Memphis. And I was educated at Vanderbilt and Yale, from which latter institution I emerged in 1955 with a brand-new Ph.D., all ready to go out and be an apostle to the gentiles, which I ventured to think would be my role as a teacher of English and American literature. And I had never had any thought of writing "creatively": I thought it would be fine if one had talent, but it had never occurred to me that I might have talent myself. Indeed, at Vanderbilt, I had taken Donald Davidson's course in "Problems in Advanced Writing," as the catalogue modestly described it; and I was the only member of the class, as I recall now, who *wasn't* writing short stories. (I was trying to write poems, but only when I began writing literary criticism did Mr. Davidson look with real favor on my work.) It

was clearly a teaching and, I hoped, scholarly career that I was marked out for; so I gave little further thought to anything in the way of "creativity" for a good many years afterwards—certainly not until after I had emerged from graduate school with my bright shiny new "union card."

But meanwhile, during my last year of graduate school, I had encountered the work of Eudora Welty. (Why had no one ever called her to my attention before?) And the first thing of hers I ever read was "Why I Live at the P.O." And I was thunderstruck. Here was this woman who had taken the language and the time and place that I had been hearing, seeing, experiencing all my life; and, *mirabile dictu*, she had turned it into a comic masterpiece, into *fiction*, with significant shape and form. And really, I had never known that fiction worked like that: I thought it all had to be "made up," spun out of the author's imaginings, his vitals, if you will. A shocking admission perhaps, but I had never been made quite so aware before that, as Miss Welty has observed elsewhere (about Jane Austen, I believe), all the best subjects for fiction are found at home. And I would add: all the good writing begins there too.

Faulkner, yes. I was prepared for his epic realizations of the South's dark and bloody history, its grand and tragic ordeal in both past and present. But that had much of it happened a long time ago and brought with it the conviction, the sanction of the past: the House Divided, the Irrepressible Conflict, the

Late Unpleasantness, and, finally, the Lost Cause. And there were blood and bugles enough there and conquered banners and the burden of time and all the rest. Or else there were dramatized in his works the grim dilemmas confronting a traditional culture in the modern age as it was forced more and more on the defensive by a hostile world—conflicts all too familiar in the headlines and on the air waves. But here was Miss Welty taking the minutiae of everyday life, as I had known it myself, the real trivia that do make up what John Crowe Ransom has called the world's body; and she was turning it into art. I simply hadn't known it could be done that way. Could I perhaps do that too?

Comparisons are odious, as we have too often seen. And I mean no such implied comparison here, between Miss Welty's work and my own. But I can testify to what I learned from her about my own time and my own place and what their possibilities were for fiction. In no sense have I ever been her protégé; indeed, I hope that I have never even been her follower. But I should like to speak here as to what I believe I learned from her about both literary form and substance and what I think I myself—and all others from her country, whether readers or writers—owe her now.

My first, admittedly abortive, efforts in fiction were, I believe now, too much playing the sedulous ape to Miss Welty's *exempla*. I was, for one thing, absolutely fascinated by her first-person narrators, who so often told more about themselves than they knew. (For that matter, the speakers in her third-person narratives often do the same.) But this was what I had been hearing, listening to all my life, I now realized. And I knew, further, that, unconsciously, I had been building up an acute sensitivity to the fine disharmonies—counterpoint, to use a highfalutin term—set up, between what people knew they were telling, indeed intended to tell, and what they were telling without knowing it. And like all Southerners, I had already done a powerful lot of listening in my life. (And I had had the great good fortune to grow up around some really gifted talkers.) And all good talkers are

good listeners, I had concluded long ago. In the South, I believe, these have always been considered real gifts, graces almost more than social. (What else is life all about, if we can't talk about our own affairs and, in turn, listen to others doing the same, which is not quite the same but almost like Mr. Bennet's question to his daughter Elizabeth as to why else we live except to make sport for our neighbors and then laugh at them in our turn?)

And I should add here that it didn't take me very long to be puzzled, then finally outraged by Katherine Anne Porter's passing observation in her introduction to *A Curtain of Green* that Sister, the postmistress-narrator of "Why I Live at the P.O." is "a terrifying case of dementia praecox," which, I assume, is the old-fashioned term for paranoid schizophrenia. And, sad to say, nearly every reader, indeed nearly every literary critic not his own man in the country—or, as one of Miss Welty's characters might say, "the whole wide world"—has bought Miss Porter's interpretation, which is to do worse than violence to one of the funniest stories I can think of in our literature. If Sister is paranoid, then I'm Greta Garbo: she's just a Southern old maid who has had a fuss with her family "on the Fourth of July, or the day after," has left home, and is now having a marvelous pout in the post office. And that's all. Of course, the fundamental rationale that Sister operates on is that China Grove, Mississippi, is the whole wide world; and she speaks of the family altercation provoked by "Stella-Rondo leaving old Mr. Whitaker and having the sweetest little adopted child" as though it were the Trojan War. And therein lies the comedy. But I'm sorry to say that, as the years have gone by, that story has gotten harder to teach. Students—and more and more of their teachers—no longer know any traditional society with its concomitant values of family and community, which is of course what Sister is defending in her own inverse, not to say perverse, way. And this may all tell us something about the kind of people who these days are writing and reading literary criticism—quite literal *home* truths I don't

care to contemplate. (As Flannery O'Connor once observed to me, the trouble with most of the people she met on the New-York-literary-cocktail-party circuit was that "they ain't *frum* anywhere.")

But it was, first, Sister, from whom I learned the most about the privileges and the perils of first-person narration. And then I encountered Edna Earle Ponder of *The Ponder Heart*. And she was almost as good. Because this "go-between," between her family and the world, as she describes herself, reveals her own commitment to the home ties of blood and place, perhaps more consciously than Sister. And they are at the very root of her existence; indeed, as she herself senses, they're almost the reason for her existence.

If it's *country* that one thinks of most often in connection with Flannery O'Connor, *place* seems the operative word with Miss Welty. Miss O'Connor of course uses the word "country" in a variety of contexts. And often she modifies it with the adjective "true." Sometimes it seems, in speaking of the writer's true country, she means that part of the world, whether exterior or interior, that he knows best—that which constitutes his real and inevitable story or stories. Again, when she speaks of mankind in general, the true country is apt to be his proper life in a redeemed economy, his life in Christ. However she means the term, though, one infers that the artist—or mankind—ignores his true country at his peril. Miss Welty, though she does not share Miss O'Connor's overt Christian "concerns," as the latter writer called them, feels much the same, I think, about the writer's *place*—and, I think, the individual's as well. And it is a word which she is not afraid to use.

In one of her finest essays, "Place in Fiction," she has shown her commitment to place as a definer, a holder-down, if you will, that makes the writer (and even the fantasy writer) always keep at least one toe on the ground: he can't shuffle off his skin, his place and be anywhere in *this* world. And she makes a very pertinent distinction there between writing of *commitment*, which is involved, indeed committed to place, and

writing of *confession*, which has no other allegiance than to the writer's own insides. And, she concludes, very often that sort of writing is dull: it's not really grounded in anything. ("They ain't *frum* anywhere"?) And who, finally, wants to read it or hear about it? For my own part, I should conclude that it was like the *news* that Thoreau condemns so heartily in *Walden*: he says that those who write it and those who read it and edit it are all old women over their tea. And I'm sorry to say this is what a lot of modern fiction seems to me: news, gossip, "who gave the ball or paid the visit last," news from the corridors of power, news from the ghetto, news from the bedroom. Indeed, it's finally all the same—gossip—and perpetrated by authors who have nothing to write about larger than themselves.

Miss Welty's place, her country—a country which she has never been afraid to denominate as regional, which she has contended all good writing must surely be—is naturally Mississippi. But this is not to suggest that there is anything of the restrictive or local colorish about her regionalism: it's simply an inevitable condition of her art, never an "export only" commodity. Her country, finally, is much more than Mississippi: it's the human heart itself, which is where her fellow-Mississippian, William Faulkner, argued that all good writing begins—with the human heart in conflict with itself. Mississippi is only her context albeit a very real and absolutely correct and, for her, inevitable one. As the late Professor Randall Stewart once observed of Faulkner, Miss Welty isn't reporting on conditions in Mississippi, but the human condition in Mississippi; not the news from Mississippi, I would add, but the news from the human heart, which she knows best in the context of her own time, her own place. (This phrase, somewhat amended, seems particularly appropriate as the title for her collection of photographs from the Thirties, which she published in 1971: *One Time, One Place*.)

When I myself have been least convinced by Miss Welty's fiction, it was usually when she did indeed try to report the news from Mississippi, as in one of her stories some

years ago in *The New Yorker*—"Where Is the Voice Coming From?" Or else she ventured too far from her true country. And thus I was relatively unconvinced by Laurel, the heroine of *The Optimist's Daughter*, who, I was afraid, had been too long gone from those parts: did Miss Welty really know her? Did Laurel really have a time and a place? Though she had gone to live in Chicago and thus presumably given up Mount Salus, its time and place, she mustn't appear to be altogether without them if she is to work in fiction. (Was it E. M. Forster or someone else who said we know Miss Bates in *Emma* is a bore but she doesn't bore us?) It's not without significance that, for me, Fay, Laurel's stepmother, and her family, the Chisoms (from Madrid, Texas), almost walk off with the book. But these are just the exceptions in Miss Welty's work which prove the rule.

But to get back to my own case for a moment. What did Miss Welty teach me as I began my long apprenticeship as a writer of fiction? (Incidentally, I don't mean to suggest here that I think my apprenticeship is over now. It never is.) I think she taught me to look and she taught me to listen. I've already spoken about what seems almost a built-in resource of Southerners where talk is concerned. Most of them come into this world talking, I believe. But Miss Welty made me listen more than I ever had—to the voices in the living room and the voices in the kitchen as well, indeed even the voices on the back porch as well as the front porch: no place was safe from her and, I hoped, from me. (Mark Twain and Ring Lardner taught me to listen too, but that would come later on. Miss Welty was the first.) What would people tell you without knowing it? Indeed, what wouldn't they tell you, even sometimes knowing it? Because we all have to talk to somebody once in a while: everybody, as one of Miss Welty's characters in *Losing Battles* remarks, has got something he could cry over. And these somethings, to my way of thinking, are, again, tied up with the heart and what, in her world, are the heart's primary allegiances—home, family, community. Perhaps this is why, in so much modern fiction, where such values

are slighted, if indeed they are still extant there, there are so little tears—God's own plenty of whining, to be sure, but not much in the way of genuine tears which spring from the heart and for reasons which can hardly be uttered. Indeed, twenty years ago, in one of the first essays I ever published, I tried to suggest something of the subtleties of these home truths in *The Ponder Heart*, these heart's reasons which Edna Earle says she can't put into words. ("Deliver me from giving you the reason," she says.)

And so I think Miss Welty taught me a lot about the Southern scene which I already knew but didn't know I knew. (And perhaps this is something any good writer gives us—this knowledge that we recognize intuitively as valid.) She gave me some knowledge of the heart's reasons, too complicated and too intricate ever to be disentangled in the small world (which is but the type or microcosm of the big wide world outside) she writes about. And she made me lose something of my fear of venturing forth with whatever news I had to proclaim from my own heart's region. And so, after nearly ten years of work and waiting, I produced my first book of stories, *Amazing Grace*, in 1965 and went on to write two others, *The Single Heart* (1971) and *The Burning Bush* (1975). And now I'm finishing another book—it's hard to say exactly what it is, history or fiction—to be called *The Home Place*, which will chronicle the growth, flowering, decline, and demise of my father's family and, by implication, many other such families in that time and place (the rural South around the turn of the century and thence into the present) and a whole culture, a whole way of life now, in many ways, almost literally gone with the wind. And it will show, too, my own increasing awareness of these changes as I grew up and my coming to value, indeed treasure the rich heritage that had been mine along the way. It's the book I think I was born to write, though I don't think I could have written it until now. And I don't think I could have written it—or my other books—in quite the same way if I hadn't learned a good deal from Miss Welty.

Miss Welty taught me to listen, but she also

taught me to look. I don't think, indeed I know, that I am not so susceptible to the visual as I am the oral and the audible. My sense of place, my own country is, for me, more a matter of the mind and the ear than the eye. But Miss Welty has helped me observe, to see the world around me—the Southern countryside, the black river bottoms and the red clay hills, their flora and fauna—better than I ever did before. She's made me watch more carefully than ever the way people dress (not just good or bad but how) and the way they walk and what gestures they make and how they look (not just pretty or ugly either). And she's awakened something in me of wonder for the geography around me, though I still don't know plants and animals so well as I should, to say nothing of terrain and weather. (Hemingway, remember, always wanted to be sure he got the weather down pat.)

Again, my Southern country, my place has been more in my ears, more in my mind. And perhaps this hasn't been altogether good either. (One friend told me that he always had trouble imagining how my characters looked. I told him just to listen to them and then he'd know.) But I never cease to marvel at how well Miss Welty, who after all is a generation older than I and presumably has had more opportunities, knows her Southern country and calls it all by its right names. Indeed, at times I've been fearful that she knew it too well, was in danger of almost being swallowed up by context, drowned in her own scenery. This, I know, was the way I felt when I first read *Losing Battles*: there was just too much geography, just as there was almost too much family. I simply couldn't keep it all straight. A second reading convinced me that I had been wrong, however; for I believed I saw that the very complexity of the family, its pulls and pushes, its stresses and counter-stresses, was mirrored in the complexity of the countryside in which it was embedded. *Delta Wedding* produced no such problems, I thought. But then, in some ways, it didn't set out to be so complicated—or perhaps ambitious—a work.

The two novels must inevitably be compared with each other, dealing as they both do

with the actions and interactions within two families, one, a family of Delta planter-aristocrats, the other, a family of "good, plain" people from the red clay hills of northern Mississippi. Both show just how clannish, how exclusive the family at its less attractive moments, can be. Both—particularly *Delta Wedding*—suggest that family and family love can be invested, to the point of folly, indeed blasphemy, with something of the religious, something almost of the divine even—what Robbie, the poor little Reid girl who married into the Fairchild family, implies when she "tells them off" in the big climactic scene at the novel's center: "You're just loving yourselves in each other—yourselves over and over again!" "A family *can't* be too close," says one of the community ladies to Troy Flavin, the red-headed overseer who is going to marry "up" into the Fairchilds. But it's one of the novel's implications that they can be, I believe. Troy Flavin is possibly just what the doctor ordered for the old great-aunts and for Aunt Tempe and Uncle Battle and some of the rest, though not Aunt Ellen, who, after years of marriage and a houseful of children, is still something of an outsider to the Fairchilds herself. And the blood from the red clay hills may just possibly improve the Fairchild stock.

Clannish the family is in *Losing Battles*, but here Miss Welty seems concerned to depict not so much the potential sacrilege of the Fairchild situation as simply an overly close group from which it may be necessary to opt out for a while, as Gloria suggests she and Jack and Lady May must do—to avoid being suffocated by the family. Miss Beulah—and the other Renfros and Beechams—are good folks: they welcome the stranger, even the potentially hostile strangers such as Judge and Mrs. Moody, to what they have and invite them to bed and board. And that's as it should be, Miss Welty suggests—in the sound and solid family who have nothing to fear from the outsider. This is the case in Miss Welty's first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman," where R. J. Bowman is readily made welcome with such hospitality as Sonny and his wife, who is with child, can offer. Good families, even the small and impecunious

ones, are generous families, she implies—perhaps even inclusive rather than exclusive. But it's a situation she deals with again and again—the family and the outsider, the group and the loner (never better this one than in "The Hitch-Hikers"), with what Robert Penn Warren has called the love and the separateness in Miss Welty's work.

And, again, it has been here that Miss Welty has spoken very much to my own condition. As the only child of older parents (my paternal grandfather was a Confederate veteran who had been at Appomattox!), I very early learned something of the uses—and the abuses—of the family. My father was one of five brothers who all lived there in that one county, and they none of them ever made a move without consulting the others. And when they all got together, as they did nearly every Sunday afternoon of the world out at my grandfather's (the Confederate veteran), I could see them drawing close together in the ties of blood and home and shared memories which inevitably defined them as individuals yet at the same time drew them even closer still. And I knew that I would never have anything like that in my life. So I was in the group yet not of it and could view, with some detachment, the forces and counter-forces which operated within it.

Perhaps it was this which, early on, made me something of an observer, surely something of a listener. (How many times was I told "Children should be seen and not heard"?) But I learned then and there something of what good talk, even more what family talk meant. And I've never forgotten it: Miss Welty simply awakened me to my inheritance. One of my uncles—the oldest one—was a Methodist preacher who was also, on the side, a very good photographer. And from him I think I began learning something, without knowing it, of pictorial, even dramatic composition and form—as he would disappear under his black hood while we stood freezing on the front steps after a Christmas dinner (we always had five, one at each of the brothers' houses!), posing us for a group picture, which he always said he wanted *for the record*, as he did also of the entries he made in the diary he

kept for forty years. And again, it was Miss Welty who awakened me to what I had been seeing, what I had been hearing all my life—the *records* I had kept, without knowing it, at the very back of my mind, and the form they should take in my fiction. And this was a very great deal, a very great benefit for her to confer albeit unknowingly.

Many people have told me that, although they enjoyed and indeed often relished what I was doing in my first-person narratives (I hardly ever write anything else), they wished I would, just for the Hell of it, try my hand at something else. But I don't know. Right now I think I'd better stick to my last—at least for the present. Because I don't think I've nearly come to the end of this resource. I'm still fascinated by what people say, how they say it, what they tell you about themselves without knowing it. And all my stories usually begin in my head with a phrase or a snatch of conversation that gets going round and round until I do something about it—get something down on paper, as though I were trying to lay a ghost. It's been said that Henry James' fictions don't present *themes* so much as *pictures*. Well, for what it's worth, my own works are all *talk*; but that can have a shape, a form as well—what Mr. Forster called *song* if I'm not mistaken. I'd never concede otherwise. One reason that, despite my initial reservations about *Losing Battles*, I welcomed it so gladly was that, once more, Miss Welty showed her fine ear for talk therein. And I felt that she was once more on home territory.

I do not feel that way about what may very well be some technically ambitious stories in her first two volumes, *A Curtain of Green* and *The Wide Net*; I did not feel that way about *The Robber Bridegroom* albeit it was grounded in the Natchez Trace which has proved so rich an inspiration for Miss Welty elsewhere. I certainly did not feel that way about *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, where I thought she had strayed much too far from home. Even *The Golden Apples*, as fine as it is, sometimes seems to me to display more art than matter. Whenever she has strayed from the Mississippi that she knows and loves—good and bad, rough and smooth, no matter the time or

the season, even "a season of dreams," it seems to me that she has been misguided, as she has been when she has sought to impose a pattern, a form, a mythology even on the Mississippi life and world that they simply will not support. But, as I have tried to make clear, these are all exceptions which, for me, prove the rule.

In addition to the stories I have already called by name as being ones I admire, there will always be "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," with the three good ladies of Victory acting the part of big bad witches to spirit the feeble-minded fairy princess away from her deaf xylophone-player prince charming. There will be "A Piece of News," where the isolation, the "separateness" of a marginally literate backwoods couple is broken forever and will never be the same again. There is still the merciless if comic recognition and depiction of the meretricious and vulgar (Katherine Anne Porter's word) in "Petrified Man," which one should always remind students contains no definite article in its title—a fact not without significance for the story's theme. There is still the perilous balance between the love and the separateness caught and held, however briefly, in time in "A Still Moment," which is surely one of Miss Welty's most beautiful stories. And these are only the high spots.

There are the continual paradoxes of the heart's reasons of *The Ponder Heart*, the good and bad of family life in *Delta Wedding* and *Losing Battles*. The love and the separateness everywhere. One paradox after another. Can they ever truly be resolved? Miss Welty is far too wise to try. She is content to pose the

dilemmas in a world which is both bad and good, ugly and beautiful, selfish and loving. This is the world she has created for us; and most of us recognize it as our own—something that goes beyond time and place but must always begin there, be rooted there. And when Miss Welty has been faithful to that Muse, she has never gone wrong. Her Mississippi has indeed become the whole wide world, with the universe opening outward from it, as in the concluding lines of *The Golden Apples*: "October rain on the Mississippi fields. The rain of fall, maybe on the whole South, for all she knew on the everywhere." And this has been her achievement, one of the most distinguished in our literature, I believe.

I hope I have not flattered myself unduly here. I should like to think Miss Welty had taught me all I've said here; I feel enormously in her debt. It was Flannery O'Connor, I think, who taught me to be true to the one or two stories I thought I had to tell, no matter what the cost; and I hope I've never let her down. But it was Miss Welty, I believe, who taught me in the beginning what my stories really were, what were my resources, and what my liabilities as well as assets. She made me hear, and she made me see. She helped me to such knowledge as I have of my own world's body. And I can't say more than that.*

*This essay was written to honor Eudora Welty on the occasion of her seventieth birthday, April 13, 1979, and was read, as the annual Phi Beta Kappa lecture, at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, May 31, 1979.